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The Celebration of Failure as Dissent in Urdu Ghazal

by

Harbans Mukhia

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The Celebration of Failure as Dissent in Urdu Ghazal*

by

Harbans Mukhia **

Recent years have brought a spate of serials centred on the theme of Urdu ghazal to the Indian television screens. The image of the ghazal in these serials is one of a kind of rhymed verse sung by courtesans in their 'kothas' (residence-cum-performance locales), under the appreciative eye of the poet, and often lustful eye of a decrepit zamindar whose purse is heavy but judgement is light. The singing is accompanied by some dancing, a few musical instruments being played by the courtesan's hangers-on, and unceasing rounds of liquor. The ambience in which the performance is enveloped is meant to convey what modern sensibilities would construe as decadence.[1]

This sensibility of decadence is reinforced by the coincidence of the efflorescence of Urdu ghazal in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries and what has for long been viewed by poets as well as historians as the crisis of Indian society, although the meaning of the term 'crisis' has undergone considerable mutation over

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** Dr. Harbans Mukhia was a former UGC National Fellow affiliated to the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Teen Murti House, New Delhi-110011 time. If in the past, the collapse of the overarching Mughal state system was perceived as the trigger for the release of centrifugal energies that drove society into an impasse,[2] for some present day historians the very imperial presence of the State in the seventeenth century was the springboard of an all-encompassing crisis in the following century.[3] But a sense of decline and decadence -- with shaded zones in which the moral, the political and the social often dissolve into one-another -- seems to permeate the historians' vision of the era which saw the emergence of this new genre of poetry in India.

Yet, the ghazal is the very opposite of that image of decadence. Indeed its history, if not strictly speaking its origin, has given it one predominant idiom, that of dissent from what its creators had themselves perceived as a kind of decadence. 'Dissent', of course, could convey a range of meanings: the overt protest which leaves one in no doubt about the intent of the poet. Such, for example, is the tenor of an early verse of Jigar Moradabadi, not quite renowned for the poetry of protest:

My defiant call is addressed
  to those immersed in the celebration
  of the new regime
That the capitalist's hand
  is still merciless in squeezing blood out
  of the bodies of the exploited.[4]

جو محوِ جشنِ نظامِ نو ہیں پکار کر ان سے کہہ رہا ہوں
نچوڑتا ہے لہو غریبوں کا دستِ سرمایہ دار اب بھی

This paper will however focus on the subtle, implicit meaning of dissent, a meaning that is constructed as much as it is conveyed. A meaning that is nuanced.

The ghazal-form is one of rhymed verse, consisting of couplets whose number could vary with each composition.[5] Each couplet or shi'r in a ghazal differs from, or is even opposed to, that of another. The ghazal therefore does not always have a single mood. It is essentially oriented towards a musical rendering, and therefore singing of all the couplets (ash'ar) of a ghazal in the same format does considerable violence to its very nature.

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There is, however, a problem here: If the ghazal does not always have a single mood, doesn't the ascription of one single meaning -- dissent, protest etc. -- to its entire history become problematic? I would try to suggest that the wide range of moods and nuances in the ash'ar notwithstanding, the ghazal's central categories -- its imagery, symbols, emotions, above all its sensuality, -- have emerged and evolved through a history which has invested them with the meaning of dissent even when the context of its origin had yielded space to another.

The etymology of the word ghazal is 'talking to a woman about love'. Ghazal therefore is quintessentially love poetry; this makes it sensual poetry, though it usually stops short of crossing the threshold into the zone of eros.[6] The aim of this paper will be to establish the social context of this love poetry and its sensuality.

The earlier explorations of the context of the overtly sensual tenor of ghazal have sought to root it in an empiricist mode of life's experience. Thus Khurshidul Islam and Ralph Russell first draw a rather gory profile of the inevitable tragic consequences of falling in love in medieval Indian society from which love had effectively been banished, and go on to explain the rise of the ghazal as an effusive manifestation of love's urges. 'Brought up in isolation from women, taught by society and his own emotions to believe in the overmastering power of love, fearful of the drastic reprisals he must face if he fell in love, himself believing that love is a danger to society, the lover is submitted to a strain which often proves literally unbearable and drives him mad. All such desperately intense emotions are expressed without restraint in the ghazal...'[7] At another place Ralph Russell confidently decalres: 'The central theme of the ghazal is love; and the love which it celebrates is, and in the society which produces the ghazal can only be, illicit love.'[8] Elaboration of this assertion comes a while later: Marriage in medieval Indian society was purely utilitarian, devoid of tenderness; love could thus constitute an experience outside of the boundaries of marriage alone; hence it was illicit.' Russell dares the Urdu-speaking scholars to admit this truth and reiterates the point: 'I repeat, therefore, that the key to the understanding of the ghazal is the realization that it is the poetry of illicit love, of the love of a man for another man's betrothed or another man's wife.'[9] Marion Molteno nearly reproduces the same argument: 'Of all the emotions which are likely to have been suppressed in daily life and seek expression in poetry, the commonest is love.... Urdu love poetry appeals powerfully to anyone who has experienced the kind of love which brings disapproval from the society around them.'[10]

Victor Kiernan, who has translated Muhammad Iqbal's and Faiz Ahmad Faiz's poetry into English, similarly traces, on a somewhat expansive contextual horizon, the overwhelming presence of love in ghazal to the absence of an actual experience of it in class divided societies: 'Romantic love between man and woman has been an instinct of every human community from the most primitive to the most refined.... But everywhere it has been hemmed-in by encroaching regulations and bans, very often following class division. In many regions, and in Asia at large by contrast with Europe, it came to be practically outlawed, and could hardly survive except in disguise. One cloak was supplied by the Sufi concept of the divine lover.' /around which the ghazal form had originated/.[11] Kiernan goes on in the same vein: 'There could be no full release for the less hardened among dominant classes from the morass of oppression and corruption in which they lived and moved and had their earthly being. Mystic poetry offered a substitute, escape from consciousness of the unpleasant realities, social as well as personal, that must have haunted them...

Sufi poetry was in essence the wail of an ossified society, a self-imprisoned civilization. The old order could only go on mouldering, all the worse attributes of the Asiatic state worsening as it grew more decrepit, until Western intrusion brought about a painful and costly new start.'[12]

Quite besides the somewhat questionable factual basis of the statement that the traditional Asian societies denied access to the experience of love to their men and women either on their own or in contrast with Europe,[13] the assumption here is that poetry, or for that matter any art form, is a mere reflex, a mirror image of one's actual sensual experience in real life. Thus both the expression as well as appreciation of a longing for love must be predicated upon an actual experience of love, manifest as sexual experience, or an actual denial of it, in real life. Presumably then societies that do not frown upon a free intermingling of men and women would be devoid of any artistic manifestation of the intense longing for love!

The positivist underpinnings of this perspective are rather overpowering; there is no space here for any degree of autonomy of imagination, feeling, expression, even appreciation of the aesthetic of an art form without and outside of a 'material', i.e., physical experience of the kind which that art form seeks to communicate. Muhammad Sadiq, author of the standard A History of Urdu Literature, laments that 'The poets take leave of facts and disport in the world of fancy and their greatness is measured by just how much they can indulge in ingenious invention.'[14] More important, there is no meaning imbedded in love poetry other than of corporeal love. It is hard not to be reminded of another positivist perspective which viewed religion as 'but the reflex of the real world', an escape from the 'real' life.[15] Quite apart from the fact that romance, love, sexual pleasure were circumscribed with far greater fury by Christian church in Europe from the inception to early modern centuries than by Islam or Hinduism in this part of the world,[16] the very assumption that life, or the world, is divided into two halves -- the 'real', i.e. material or sensual, and the cultural, or religious or aesthetic, that is at best 'unreal' in the sense of being a mere reflex, or at worst a cloak or escape from that real world -- is highly problematic, to put it mildly. It is not easy to understand how an aesthetic experience, or the feeling for beauty, is less real or a mere escape than the experience of making a living, for example or 'sublimating' love in sexual intercourse; or a Sufi's ecstasy in what he experiences as his union with god any the less real, or a cloak, a surrogate sexual pleasure because he has been denied such pleasure in 'real life'.

Besides, this conception establishes a unitary meaning of love as purely corporeal and thus divests it of all its multiple nuances, its manifold ambiguities. For, love in Sufi discourse is an attribute of god, and the feeling of love in a human being is a manifestation of god's own existence. Indeed, Sufism consciously seeks to distance the experience of love from physical passion; it is cultivated and felt in the spirit (ruh) rather than in the body.[17] In Aijaz Ahmad's perception, 'Urdu poetry... never contemplates the experience of love in terms of a spefific love relation.' It is, for him, one of three questions that constitute the metaphysics of Urdu poetry, the other two being the nature of the universe and of god.[18]

In medieval Hindi sringar poetry (poetry of romance), there is little urge for the suppression of one's love for the sweetheart; indeed, it must constantly find utterance. The ghazal, on the other hand, sanctifies the concealment of one's love, keeping it a raz. The more the lover suppresses the manifestation of his love, the more he internalises it, the more he suffers the intense loneliness and sadness of love -- that for him is the ultimate ecstasy, the supreme gham (the joy of eternal longing).

Neither of these conventional forms is a reflex of life's empirical experience; both are literary constructs whose significations go as much beyond life's quotidian existence as the limits of their own text.

This paper therefore seeks to explore yet another facet of the expression of love and sensuality in the Urdu ghazal by locating it in an alternative social context. The context is one with two folds which mould ghazal's history: Perso-Islamic lineage and Indian folklore.

Originating as part of Qasidah (panegyric), with traces in Arabic literature, the ghazal developed as dissent from Islamic orthodoxy, but a dissent that remained internal to Islam, as another face of Islam, especially in Persian literary ambience.[19] By the time Urdu ghazal made its appearance, the Islamic context had considerably, though not entirely receded, for, this was also the time when renewed attempts were being made in

India to assert an Islamic social and cultural identity to make up for the loss of 'Muslim' political power.[20] But the history of the ghazal had given protest against religious bigotry a hegemony that became supreme as well as autonomous. This hegemony was then easily transferred on to 'secular' motifs either by altering the categories--imagery, metaphors, symbolisms etc. -- or, more frequently, through a subtle change of nuances of old images, symbols, metaphors.

We might turn to a brief history of mutations within Islam for locating the origin of the ghazal in it. This context has not remained unexplored by scholars earlier and some repetition of their researches could therefore perhaps be excused as necessary to make the point.

Islam, like every monotheistic religion, comprises two interrelated elements: universalism and protest, both manifest in its ideological underpinnings. The ideology of the meek inheriting the earth, as in Christianity, or of the existence of one god who looks after all his children with equal favour, as in Islam, constitutes a discourse in the true Foucauldian sense -- the assertion of a new relation of social power.[21] This assertion invokes the universe of the 'meek' and the deprived and counterposes an egalitarian ideology to one of dominance and subordination, drawing upon the dormant memory of tribal egalitarianism, as secular ideologies, such as Marxism, were to do later on.

But the history of religions is also the history of strife, conflict, conquest and subjugation. It is more than ironic that a religion based upon universalism, protest and egalitarianism should culminate in conquest and subjugation; but then no egalitarian ideology creates, at least has ever empirically created, social equality. What it does create, however, is space for upward social mobility for those at the lower rungs of society. Islam created that space and unleashed enormous social energy.

Upward social movement itself inevitably generates consequential movement of social differentiation. Beginning with the assertion of tribal egalitarianism, the process of social differentiation and the history of the regions conquered by Arabic Islam eroded the fundamental tenets of Muhammad's discourse. Islam, thus face to face with tension between the inertia of existing structures and the momentum of the break, was going back upon itself, blurring the demarcating lines between continuity and change. But then this differentiation, the going back upon itself, was to create its own tensions and protests.

Early Islam thus witnessed a whole spectrum of dissensions -- Shi'ite, Kharijite, Mu'atazalite... Of these the last was an overt challenge that sought to subvert the newly emerged social differentiation and consequential hegemony; it combined arguments derived from Greek rationality and communitarian zeal and challenged the newly established social structure from below. It was more than a doctrinaire movement, being cast in an activist mould. It was therefore crushed with a heavy hand.[22]

There was, however, another mode of dissent, short on the activist front, but strong on the 'moral' plane. It was far less virulent than the Mu'atazalite challenge; it did not seek to overthrow the new social regime, and bounded its protest within the given structure where it focused upon its 'impurities', and 'deviations' vis-a-vis the Islamic ideal. This was the Sufi protest.[23] Unlike the Mu'atazalite movement, which was strong, challenging but shortlived, the less volatile Sufi protest proved far more durable precisely for reasons of remaining internal to the system.

The Sufis, in focusing upon the impurities that had crept into Islam were seeking to appropriate the legacy of Muhammad and his immediate successors, the pious caliphs, and thus highlighting the impieties of the present by contradistinction. The regime of Muhammad and the pious caliphs for long remained the reference point in both religious and secular literature in Islam.

The State, in Sufi discourse, constituted the chief deviation from Islamic puritanism and it thus became the focal point of disapproval expressed in various modes: one was to establish distance between oneself and the institutions and officials of the state. The Sufis were, by excluding themselves from the discourse of the state, expressing their disapproval of it; in a subtle way they were also excluding the state from their own disccurse. But then the exclusion was always shaded with a certain ambivalence, for the Sufis did not question the existence of the state. In courting and practising poverty, they expressed disapproval of riches, but their doors were not closed to 'unsought donations' (futuh), including at times from the rulers.[24] The monarchical form of governance, with all power vesting with the ruler, provided the prototype for the authority system that guided the functioning of their single monastic establishments or the whole 'order' of these establishments (khanqahs and silsilahs): the high estimate of the spiritual calibre of a Sufi was best expressed in analogy with the ruler -- Sultan al-Mashaikh (Sultan amongst the shaikhs),[25] the practive of demarcated territorial jurisdiction of each khanqah copied the pattern of state adminstration;[26] at a certain stage, state officials began to maintain professional representatives (Vakils) to intercede on their behalf with the living or dead Sufis for their benediction, just as their Vakils protected their material interests at the imperial Court.[27] The rulers on the other hand constantly treated the Sufi renouncers as their superior by visiting them in their hermitage, by giving them gifts and by expressing the wish to give up their kingdom and become darvishes.[28] A certain element of symbiosis therefore moderated the tension of the Sufis' relationship with the state. The relationship was, in Akbar S. Ahmad's words, akin to 'the opposition party to the establishment'.[29]

If this was one mode of expressing Sufis' disapproval of the state, the other -- often an extension of the first -- was to adopt stances very different from, at times even opposed to, the stances of the ruling class and, in particular, its ideological props, the 'ulama. The coalition between the ruler and the 'alim is a later, logical corollary of the integration of political and religious authority in one person -- first in Muhammad, then in the long line of his successors, the caliphs. It is with the establishment of sult (power) as the basis of governance that the Sultan and the Sultanate saw to the separation between the persons holding political and religious authority, partly as a reassertion of pre-Islamic Persion tradition and, to an even greater degree, the Turko-Mongol tradition in which Islam sat rather lightly at the surface under which a whole range of pagan religious forms and practices persisted.[30]

The Sufi thought and practice, originating in Arabia, found its efflorescence in Iran and India, its best literary manifestation being the Persian ghazal, the parent form of the Urdu ghazal. At the level of ideology, the Sufis counterposed the individual mystic experience to the argumentative theology of the ulama. Two world-views were being constructed here: the world of the heart and that of the head, a durable dichotomy central to the ghazal poets.[31] Thus Jalal al-Din Rumi, the greatest of mystic poets of the Persian language:

> Draw away your controlling hand from me, Wisdom,
> For, I am immersed in Majnun this day

بشوی اے عقل دستِ خویش از من
کہ در مجنون پیوستم من امروز -

The counterposition of the head and the heart is not one of rationality and irrationality, but of argumentation and feeling, of hegemonic ambition and universalism. The constructed realm of the head was contentious, fractious, domineering which brooked no dissent; that of the heart experienced love, affection, humanism and therefore was universalist. One was a world of friction, conquest, hegemony; the other a world of harmony and peace amidst divergence. Hafiz Shirazi, who, besides Rumi, was the other great poet of the Sufi genre in the Persian language, put this construction with the most charming simplicity:

Every foundation you see is vulnerable
The foundation of love alone is free
of any disturbance

خلل پزیر بود ہر بنا کہ می بینی
بجز بنائے محبت کہ خالی از خلل است ۔

The head vs. the heart or khirad vs. junoon dichotomy, characteristic of the ghazal, also implicated a dichotomy of elite vs. popular cultures, the poet always upholding the latter with its universalist categories -- love, affection, humanism, sorrow, pain etc. counterposed to the perceived elite categories of conquest and dominance, equated with the head. In the Persian poet Jami's sh'ir:

Deprived of rectitude and corrupted with fear
This is where the people of wisdom have landed us

درماندهٔ صلاح و فسادیم الحذر
زین رسمہا کہ مردم عاقل نہادہ اند

The experience of the heart, counterposed to the argumentation of the head, found expression in the language of love, of romance. In the Persian ghazal compositions of the Sufis, god is mostly portrayed as the woman, the beloved, and man as the lover. The everlasting longing of the Sufi soul for union with god finds utterance in the longing of the lover for the beloved. The expression of intensely emotional devotion to god in terms of the human feelings of love between man and woman points to its popular origins, similar to expressions in other cultural zones, such as the Radha-Krishna legends in literature, painting and sculpture. The Radha-Krishna relationship, however, goes further than longing and the ecstasy of their union often finds expression in the orgasmic ecstasy of lovers after a life-long waiting and pining.[32]

In the ghazal, however, there is to be no union; for the poet, longing itself is the ecstasy, a value, an end. Thus gham, (literally sorrow or pain, but better understood as 'eternal longing'), central to the ghazal, is celebrated and courted rather than lamented and averted.

Majnun (the one possessed, the one obsessed with love for his beloved Laila in the Arab legendary romance) becomes the role model for the ghazal poet: a man in tattered clothes, the very image of total failure in life and even in love, yet a failure because of his obsession with love to the point of insanity, stones being cast at him, subject to social defamation, yet evoking a silent admiration for his magnificent obsession, his contempt of temporal success -- this is the image the ghazal-poet most empathises with. Majnun of the ghazal is the very embodiment of gham, for which the poet longs forever. We have already heard Jalal al-Din Rumi exclaim his 'immersion' in Majnun to the derision of Wisdom. Mirza Ghalib evokes the same empathy:

> Even as I, a young lad,
>   picked up a stone to cast at Majnun
> The vision of my own bleeding head as I would
> grow up passed before my eyes
> [and the stone dropped from my hand]

> میں نے مجنوں پہ لڑکپن میں اسد
> سنگ اٹھایا تھا کہ سر یاد آیا

In the image of Majnun, the poet was celebrating the humane 'insanity' of the lover and his world of complete failure in counterposition to the inhuman 'sanity' of the pursuit of success by the mighty and the dominant. Gham, eternal longing, itself implied the failure to unite with the sweetheart and as such stood for total failure in life, for the sweetheart could be anyone or anything -- woman, god, revolution, humanity, a cause, whatever. Gham courts, dignifies and celebrates failure.

The courting and celebration of failure is a form of resistance, of disapproval, even of lampooning of the 'success' of Authority, secular or religious. The puritannical, forever-sermonising Muhtasib, Waiz, Nasih, Shaikh -- representing both religious and state authority -- became special targets of ridicule and defiance:

Hafiz heads from the khanqah to the tavern
If only to recover his senses
after the moralist's hypocritical sermon

ز خانقاه به میخانه میرود حافظ
مگر ز مستی زهد و ریا بهوش آمد

Sauda, the eighteenth century Urdu poet reverts to a theme common among poets of the ghazal: the moralist -- Shaikh, Muhtasib, etc. -- sermonising others on temperance, but himself stealing into the tavern:

Even as the Shaikh passed by the tavern in the eve
It's beyond Sauda to describe the treatment
meted him by the tavern mates

کوئی میخانہ سے ناگہہ شام کو گزرے جو شیخ
کیا کہوں سودا جو رندوں نے سلوک ان سے کیا

For Mir, Sauda's contemporary and trend-setter of Urdu poetry, 'ass' (khar) was the favourite, if a little impolite epithet for the Shaikh. And Ghalib berates the Waiz thus:

101427
पुस्तकालय
पुस्तकालय
विश्वविद्याल

What! the Waiz standing aface the tavern door!
But, believe me, Ghalib, I did see him stealing in
as I departed

کہاں میخانہ کا دروازہ غالب اور کہاں واعظ
پر اتنا جانتے ہیں کل وہ جاتا تھا کہ ہم نکلے

Indeed, this lampooning of the religious moralist, standing-in for the Ulama, is one of the invariable motifs of the ghazal poets, irrespective of their own predilections. For, life-principle, if the term be permitted, even a life steeped in immense agony is of cardinal faith for the poet; this upholding of life as the supreme principle is tantamount to denial of supremacy of even god and religion over it. For Ghalib:

Mercy be for the melody of life
Even for the melody steeped in agony
For, some day

music will ebb away from this song

نغمہ ھائے غم کو بھی اے دل غنیمت جانیۓ
بے صدا ہو جائیگا یہ سازِ ہستی ایک دن

Or, in a gem of a sh'ir Ghalib laments life's sorrows, life here impersonating more than himself:

I am not the rose of melody
  nor the sound of music
I am the echo of life itself
  that lies shattered

نہ گلِ نغمہ ہوں نہ پردۂ ساز
میں ہوں اپنی شکست کی آواز

Even as Ghalib hears the echo of life shattered around him, the imagery he draws upon is that of the colour of the rose of melody and the resonance of a musical instrument somewhere in the distance. The imagery of melody for life immersed in sorrow is common to both the couplets cited above.

Life in turn is perceived entirely in its sensual moment, counterposed to the chilling puritanism preached by the Muhtasib, hence by religious orthodoxy, carrying with it the authority of the State. This sensuality is expressed in a continuum from the seventeenth century poet J'afar Zatalli's extremely 'obscene' (i.e. sexually explicit) poetry, much like hardcore porn, to the subtle, elite poetry of Ghalib. Zatalli's 'obscenity' too is best appreciated as one that stands the puritanism of Aurangzeb's reign on its head, though he composes a poem in honour of the emperor as well.[33] In a polished mode, it is hard to locate a more aesthetic expression of sensuality than in Ghalib's sh'ir:

If life has ebbed away from my limbs
    the glow of desire still lingers in the eyes
Let the pitcher and the cup be before me

گو ہاتھ کو جنبش نہیں آنکھوں میں تو دم ہے
رہنے دے ابھی ساغر و مینا مرے آگے

If lampooning the Shaikh etc. challenged institutional authority, the ghazal poets went beyond the institution and contested the ideological grounding of the Ulama's version of Islam which brooked no dissent, for it is dissent above all that the ghazal-poets upheld and celebrated. For the Ulama the truth of Islam was to be manifest in an act of conquest, subjugation and humiliation of people of other faiths, especially Kafirs. Zia al-Din Barani, the fourteenth century historian was aghast that the Sultans of Delhi were content with the imposition of jiziya on their non-Muslim subjects as an index of the Islamic nature of their state; they missed the real import of it, namely that the Kafirs must be humiliated for their refusal to convert to Islam.[34] In the celebrated conversation between Sultan Ala al-Din Khalji and a Qazi of his empire, Mughis al-Din, the Qazi allegedly reprimanded the Sultan for collecting the revenue from the Hindus merely for filling up the state's coffers rather than as a means of humiliation for them. He even prescribed, in gory detail, the form of such humiliation: While collecting the revenue, if the collector wished to spit into the Kafir's mouth, the Kafir should open his mouth to receive the spit. It is in such action that the glory of Islam lies.[35] In the reign of Sikandar Lodi, the Ulama insisted on the execution of a Brahmin, Lodhan by name, who had the audacity to observe that both Islam and Hinduism were at par as far as the Truth was concerned.[36] Akbar too, early in his reign, had to succumb, much against his will, to the pressure of Shaikh Abd al-Nabi, his Sadr, and order the execution of another Brahmin, who, the Sadr felt, had been less than respectful to Muhammad.[37] The dichotomy between the Faith and Kufr was, for the Ulama, permanent and indissoluble.

Not for the ghazal-poets, though. For them it was ishq (Love), manifest as gham, that stood above all other antagonisms and diluted, even dissolved them. For Makhdum al-Mulk

Whoever sets his foot firmly in ishq
Passes beyond the boundaries of Kufr and Islam

هر کرا در عشق محکم شد قدم
درگذشت از کفر و از اسلام هم

Ghalib is equally attracted by the force of Islam and of Kufr:

Faith pulls me back
even as Infidelity draws me with force
I stand transfixed
between the Ka'aba and the church

ایماں مجھے روکے ہے تو کھینچے ہے مجھے کفر
کعبہ مرے پیچھے تو کلیسا مرے آگے

and more challengingly:

In God's name draw not the veil away from the face
of the Ka'aba
Lest the selfsame Kafir idol make its appearance
underneath

خدا کے واسطے پردہ نہ کعبہ سے اٹھا ظالم
کہیں ایسا نہ ہو یاں بھی وہی کافر صنم نکلے

For Ghalib the very holiness of the Ka'aba itself is a mere veil, which is just as well left intact lest the of it, namely that the Kafirs must be humiliated for their refusal to convert to Islam.[34] In the celebrated conversation between Sultan Ala al-Din Khalji and a Qazi of his empire, Mughis al-Din, the Qazi allegedly reprimanded the Sultan for collecting the revenue from the Hindus merely for filling up the state's coffers rather than as a means of humiliation for them. He even prescribed, in gory detail, the form of such humiliation: While collecting the revenue, if the collector wished to spit into the Kafir's mouth, the Kafir should open his mouth to receive the spit. It is in such action that the glory of Islam lies.[35] In the reign of Sikandar Lodi, the Ulama insisted on the execution of a Brahmin, Lodhan by name, who had the audacity to observe that both Islam and Hinduism were at par as far as the Truth was concerned.[36] Akbar too, early in his reign, had to succumb, much against his will, to the pressure of Shaikh Abd al-Nabi, his Sadr, and order the execution of another Brahmin, who, the Sadr felt, had been less than respectful to Muhammad.[37] The dichotomy between the Faith and Kufr was, for the Ulama, permanent and indissoluble.

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کہیں ایسا نہ ہو یاں بھی وہی کافر صنم نکلے

For Ghalib the very holiness of the Ka'aba itself is a mere veil, which is just as well left intact lest the truth, i.e. the Kafir idol, be discovered as the foundation of the Faith.'

Indeed, for the poets, 'Kafir' becomes the greatest term of endearment, a synonym for the sweetheart. Thus for Mir a fleeting glimpse of the Kafir idol's face is enough to forget all about Islam:

Ever since the Kafir idol's face
   passed before my eyes
My heart is no longer inclined towards Islam
   even a wee bit

دیکھی ہے جب سے اس بتِ کافر کی شکل میر
جاتا نہیں ہے جی تنک اسلام کی طرف

and Ghalib uses a delightful pun to express his love for the Kafir beloved:

Love erases the difference between life and death
I live by the sight of the Kafir
   who takes my breath away

محبت میں نہیں ہے فرق جینے اور مرنے کا
اسی کو دیکھ کر جیتے ہیں جس کافر پہ دم نکلے

However, unlike in the history of the Persian ghazal in the Sufi milieu in which it engages in a fierce contestation of the ulama's ground, Urdu ghazal developed in India when the Mughal empire was waning and any perception of the ascendancy of Islam could hardly be empirically sustained. Urdu ghazal is therefore far less attuned to the problems of spiritualism or Sufism or any form of religious philosophy than the Persian ghazal was,[38] though of course Sufic undertones are easy to detect in the very notion of unbounded love for the sweetheart, or of gham itself, reminiscent of the fundamental Sufi notion of fana (self-decimation and immersion in the beloved, i.e., god). But then the operative categories of this poetry, once formed, transcended their immediate context and remained hegemonic even in other contexts.

The Urdu ghazal also evolved within the Indian folkloric milieu, far more permeable to pluralist cultural streams than several other civilizations.[39] Urdu ghazal, and Urdu literature in general, derives a great deal of its idiom from this milieu, even when its poetics are Persian in their origin. A remarkable testimony to the influences of this milieu is the 'Indianisation' of even classic Persian texts, such as the Dastan-i Amir Hamza, in its Urdu version.[40]

It is important to remember that Urdu was initially, and for a very long time, the bazaar language, spoken by the common people and derided by the elite. It is equally important to remember that the early Urdu ghazals were composed in the bazaar language whether in the Deccan, or in Lucknow or in Delhi; consequently, not only the vocabulary and the idiom but the whole culture of the bazaar gets imbibed and reflected in the poetry, inviting derision of the elite Persian poets of the Court. Jafar Zatalli reflects the unpolished exuberance of that culture in Delhi. Through the eighteenth century, whether in the compositions of Delhi's Urdu poets like Naji, Fayiz, Dard, Soz or of the great masters like Sauda and Mir, the language continued to be heavily moulded by the one spoken in the streets. In the Deccan, at the hands of Quli Qutb Shah and Wajahi, it is the script, rather than the language, that showed any marked influence of the Persian ghazal. Thus in Quli Qutb Shah's couplet

> Steeped I am in love, O Lala
> Place the cup of your lips on mine

> عشق میں مست متوالی ہوں لالا
> تو آپ ادھراں تھے منج کو دینا پیالا

except for the Persian word ishq, all other words are local and the whole structure of the sentiment (very inadequately carried in the translation) as well as the idiom are taken as if from the lore of Krishna. So too in Wajahi:

I can hardly lift the cup without my love
I can hardly live a moment without my love.

پیا بن پیالہ اُچا جائے نا
پیا باج یک تل جیا جائے نا

Interestingly, in both these couplets the subject is female expressing love for the male, akin to the Hindi tradition, instead of the other way around which came to characterise later Urdu ghazal.[41] It is with Mirza Ghalib that the language and the imagery came to acquire a heavy Persian garb.

Sensuality and the principle of the supremacy of life, or life-principle, are essential characteristics of folklore. At the level of folklore, life-principle governs human relationship with divinity; there is no conception here of an Almighty God, with absolute authority over human life and human beings unqualified subjection to it. On the contrary, human relationship with divinity is based on contractual terms with clear cut material or sensual objects in view: birth of a son, cure from chronic ailments, plentiful harvest and, not infrequently, fall of calamity on one's adversary -- all this in return for a price: donation to a tomb or a temple, feast for the gods, etc.[42] If the contract falls through, wholesome abuse of god follows in its train. At the elite level, the relationship is far more one sided, though of course the dividing lines can never be very neatly drawn.

The 'secular' colour of Urdu ghazal may perhaps reflect the impact of this second sorce of its formation, the culture of the bazaar, particularly in view of the receding importance of Islam and the strong flavour of lampooning the ruler and the priest that marks folklore.

From both the Persian as well as the folklore lineages, Urdu ghazal drew upon the tradition of dissent to evolve its categories. So hegemonic did these become that even when rulers or priests themselves composed the ghazal, the only categories available, and which they happily employed, were the ones that had the smell of ridiculing them.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

* This paper has been long in coming. Earlier versions were experimented with in Seminars at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, Hindu College at the University of Delhi, my own Centre at JNU, and the Universities of Michigan and Pennsylvania at Ann Arbor and Philadelphia respectively. The discussion at each of these seminars greatly helped to sharpen arguments. Personal discussions with Professors Namwar Singh, Sadiqur Rahman Qidwai and Aslam Parvez were of immense help and I am extremely greateful to them for many suggestions. Muzaffar Alam and S. Ainul Hasan generously shared their knowledge of Persian literature with me and I remain deeply beholden to them. However, it was the stridency of Aijaz Ahmad's criticism at the Nehru Museum seminar, that added dimensions I had not thought of to begin with. So, special thanks to him.
The translations of verses are, however, my own.

1. Much of this construction of decadence is indeed equated with 'excessive' sexual indulgence, perceived as 'moral' decline. Sir Jadunath Sarkar speaks of the setting-in of a 'moral canker in the Mughal Empire', manifest, among other things, as the 'sexual excess' and 'drug habit' of Muhammad Shah, last of the line of notable imperial rulers; see Fall of the Mughal Empire, Vol. I, Calcutta, 1932, pp. 5, 7. In Tara Chand's vision, in the 18th century '...an indescribable malaise had settled upon the spirit of India (and) a moral and intellectual canker was sapping its vitality', though his reference point is art and literature; see his History of the Freedom Movement, I, Delhi, 1961, pp. 217-18. The ghazal itself has frequently been perceived as an index of medieval 'moral' decadence. See M. Sadiq, A History of Urdu Literature, London, 1964, pp. 33-34.

However, doubts about the notion of decline in the 18th century began to be raised early. Hermann Goetz in his The Crisis of Indian Civilization in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries, Calcutta, 1938, conceded the decay of the imperial polity, but saw cultural efflorescence in the period. George D. Bearce too questioned the construction of decline in the sphere of culture and traced the notion to 'the historiography of nineteenth century utilitarians and reformers of Britain' reinforced by historians inspired by the freedom struggle; see his 'The Culture of Eighteenth Century India: A Reappraisal', Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 24th Session, 1961, pp. 287-296. More recently several valuable works of C.A.Bayly has opened the problematic of decline to an encompassing reevaluation.

2. The classic argument in this genre was put forward by Sir Jadu Nath Sarkar in his 4-volume Fall of the Mughal Empire, Calcutta, 1932-50.

3. The most influential among the works of this group of distinguished historians is indisputably Irfan Habib's The Agrarian System of Mughal India, published in 1963, which laid down the framework of the alternative argument. Ever since its publication, and more so of late, the book has been treated with such reverence at Aligarh Muslim University that the slightest questioning of it evokes an almost abusive response. Thus, two recent papers published in the name of 'M. Athar Ali' on India's eighteenth century hail studies that confirm the findings of the book and denounce all others that raise the slightest doubts about it as mere 'smoke of verbiage' easy to 'blow away', See M. Athar Ali, 'Recent Theories of Eighteenth Century India', The Indian Historical Review, XII, 1-2, 1986-87, pp. 102-110; M.Athar Ali, 'The Mughal Polity -- A critique of Revisionist Approaches', Modern Asian Studies, 27, 4, 1993, pp. 699-710. The debating point in these papers, as in Z.U.Malik, 'Core and Periphery: A Contribution to the Debate on the Eighteenth century', Social Scientist, 210-211, Nov.-Dec. 1990, pp. 3-35, is the rather outdated dichotomies of the centralised vs. the decentralised Mughal state or the dark vs. the bright 18th century.

4. Later on, realising that such stridency was somewhat out of tune with the ghazal's genre, Jigar republished it as a poem (nazm) rather than as a ghazal. See Sadiqur Rahman Qidwai, Tasir na ke Tanqeed, New Delhi, 1991, p. 132. However, it is this poetry of overt protest that is the theme of Muhammad Hasan's 'Urdu Mein Ehtejaji Adab', Asari Adab, 29-30, May-August 1977, pp. 28-49.

5. Sadiq, however, observes that early on in the course of its evolution, the ghazal would usually comprise 'ten lines (five couplets) or so', A History of Urdu Literature, p. 19.

6. Sadiq, however, has no doubt about the erotic nature of the ghazal: '...the ghazal ... is almost wholly erotic...', ibid, p. 16. The certitude indeed arises from Sadiq's reluctance to distinguish between sensuality and eroticism.

7. Khurshidul Islam and Ralph Russell, Three Mughal Poets: Mir, Sauda, Mir Hasan, Delhi reprint, 1991, pp. 98-99, 107-108.

8. Ralph Russell, The Pursuit of Urdu Literature: A Select History, Delhi, 1992, p. 32.

9. Ibid., pp. 33-35.

10. Marion Molteno, 'Approaching Urdu Poetry', in Ralph Russell, The Pursuit of Urdu Literature, p. 15.

11. Victor Kiernan, 'Persian poetry and its cosmopolitan audience' in Christopher Shackle ed., Urdu and Muslim South Asia: Essays in Honour of Ralph Russell, London, 1989, OUP Delhi reprint, 1991, p. 14.

12. Ibid., p. 15, See also Kiernan, Poems by Faiz, London, 1971, Introduction, p. 36, where Urdu poetry has been envisioned as society's safety-valve.

13. All the authors cited above have perceived the experience of love in purely corporeal, sexual terms. If one were to accept the articulation of the notion of love between man and woman exclusively in terms of sexual experience, the contrast then between Europe and India is indeed the other way round. For, it was the Christian Church in Europe which established a double association of sex with guilt and guilt with Eve, responsible for the fall of Adam from the Garden of Eden. Through the Middle Ages down to modern times the Church frowned upon sexual pleasure as sin, even when mediated through marriage. Simone de Beauvoir in her Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter gives voice to this feeling inculcated in her through her family's protectiveness in her childhood. For the Church's grave disapproval of any kind of joy in sex, see among many works, Georges Duby, The Knight, The Lady and The Priest: The Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France, tr. from the French by Barbara Bray, Harmondsworth, 1985; Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, ed., A History of Women, Vol. II entitled Silences of the Middle Ages, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1992, especially the Section 'Norms of Control'; Jack Goody, The Development of the Family and Marriage in Europe, Cambridge, England, 1983; Jean-Louis Flandrin, 'Contraception, Marriage and Love in the Christian West' tr. from the French by Monica Juneja in Maurice Aymard and Harbans Mukhia, eds., French Studies in History, Vol. II, New Delhi, 1990, pp. 44-71.

In India on the other hand, if Manu had a purely functional vision of sex which implicated the subjugation of woman to man, there was also the long libertarian tradition of which Vatsayayana's Kama Sutra is the best known, though not the only work. This tradition is placed in the Hindu religious made in which Kama, sexual pleasure, becomes an object of life's pursuit, Vatsayayana becomes a sage and temples are built with explicit sexual motifs. The tradition lays great stress upon sex as an object of pleasure for both the man and the woman; indeed, the man is enjoined upon to please the woman in every which way she can be pleased before, during and after love-making.

It was the perfect compatibility of the pursuit of sexual pleasure and devotion to god that was idolised by an eighteenth century Hindi poet, Anand Kavi, in his composition Koka Manjari. An illustration:

> Man has taken his avatara for the sake of three objects
> Earning wealth, worshipping god and making love to
> beautiful women

> मनुज रूप ह्वै अवतर्यौ तीन वस्तु के जोग
> द्रव्य उपार्जन, हरि भजन, अरु कामिनी के संग भोग

The medieval Muslim Arabic text, The Perfumed Garden of Sheikh Nefzawi, also written in a religious mode, similarly emphasises sex as an object of pleasure. See Charles Fowkes, ed., The Illustrated Kama Sutra, tr. Sir Richard Burton, Middlesex, 1987. The book also contains the translations of two other texts, The Ananga-Ranga of Kalyana Malla and The Perfumed Garden, all of them profusely illustrated with photo reproductions of erotic medieval Indian paintings and sculptures, themselves evidence of the relative absence of inhibitions about sex compared to Europe.

14. M. Sadiq, A History of Urdu Literature, p. 34. Sadiq's lament, however, lacks even in originality, for, Ram Babu Saksena in his A History of Urdu Literature, had already foreshadowed it: 'Facts were divorced from poetry....', New Delhi, 1990 reprint of the first 1927 edn., p. 21.

15. Karl Marx, Capital, Vol. I, Moscow, 1954, p. 79.

16. See n. 14 above.

17. Of the immense amount of literature on this theme, see Henry Corbin, Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi, tr. from the French by Ralph Manheim, Princeton, 1969, p. 221; Javad Nurbakhsh, 'Two Approaches to the Principle of the Unity of Being' in Leonard Lewisohn, ed., The Legacy of Mediaeval Persian Sufism, London, 1992, p. xii; J.C. Burgel, 'Ecstacy and Order: Two Structural Principles in the Ghazal Poetry of Jalal al-Din Rumi', in ibid., p. 64. William C. Chittick in his The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi, Albany, 1983, deals with the theme of love in a chapter, pp. 194-231. Mir Valihuddin traces the stages of the Sufi spritiual experience of love in Love in its Essence: The Sufi Approach, New Delhi, 1967.

18. Aijaz Ahmad, ed., Ghazals of Ghalib, New York and London, 1971, p. xvi.

19. See for the most recent discussions of this aspect essays by S. Hossein Nasr, Leonard Lewisohn, Annemarie Schimmel, Johann Christoph Burgel and J.T.P. Bruijn in L. Lewisohn, ed., The Legacy of Mediaeval Persian Sufism.

20. Shah Waliullah's is clearly the most vigorous attempt to establish a homogenous cultural personality of the Indian Muslims under the hegemony of the ulama's vision. See S.A.A. Rizvi, Shah Wali-Allah and His Times, Calcutta, 1980; and Mohammad Umar, Islam in Northern India during the Eighteenth Century, New Delhi, 1993.

21. At the heart of Foucault's notion of discourse lies the question of relation of power whether between individuals, groups or institutions. Foucault has developed this notion in several of his writings, but see especially his 'Two Lectures' and 'Truth and Power' in Colin Gordon ed., Michel Foucault: Power/Knowledge Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-77, Sussex, 1980, pp. 78-133.

22. For a discussion of various movements of sectarian opposition within early Islam, Marshall G.S. Hodgson, The Venture of Islam, Vol. I: 'The Classical Age of Islam', Chicago, 1974, pp. 241-279.

23. Although the study of Sufism has been carried out extensively, the best recent introduction to the theme is William C. Chittick, The Sufi Path of Love.

24. The Naqshbandi order of the Sufis in particular had no problem with courting proximity to the rulers and partaking of their largesse. One of the leading figures of this order, Khwaja Ubaidullah Ahrar, justified such closeness with the ruler thus: 'Times have become very evil. If possible, there is no act better than serving at the court of the kings and rulers (through which) to assist the poor and the oppressed'. See Jo-Ann Gross, 'Authority and Miraculous Behaviour: Reflections on Karamat Stories of Khwaja Ubaidullah Ahrar' in L. Lewisohn, ed., The Legacy of Mediaeval Persian Sufism, p. 163.

25. It is thus that the most eminent saint of the Chishti order in India, Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya is invariably addressed in Khwaja Amir Khurd Kirmani Nizami, Siyar al-Auliya, a near contemporary record of the Shaikh's conversations, Urdu tr. by Khwaja Islam al Din Nizami, New Delhi, 1985.

26. Hasan Sijzi, Fuwaid al-Fu'ad, pp. 137-38 cited in K.A. Nizami, Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during the Thirteenth Century, Delhi, 1974 (reprint), p. 176.

27. S. Liyaqat H. Moini, 'The Hindus and the Dargah of Ajmer, A.D. 1658-1737: An Overview' in A.J. Qaisar and S.P. Verma, eds., Art and Culture, Jaipur, 1993, pp. 155-163.

28. A large number of Mughal miniatures depict the visits of imperial princes, and in some cases, of rulers themselves, to the hermitages with gifts. The depiction is nearly always suggestive of the superiority of the holy man and the acceptance of subordinate position by the prince, for the prince is shown observing great decorum in the holy presence whereas the saint is shown carefreely postured. Court chroniclers, like Shams Siraj Afif and Abul Fazl are forever keen to establish the affinity of the rulers of their day with the darvish. Emperor Babur revelled in the epithet qalandar (recluse) and expressed his wish to hand over his throne to his son and become a renouncer.

29. Akbar S. Ahmad, Discovering Islam: Making Sense of Muslim History and Society, London and N.Y., pp. 10 and 90.

30. For the invocation of pre-Islamic cultural and political ethos of Iran, the best and most renowned work is of course Firdausi's Shah Nama, tr. into English by Reuben Levy, revised by Amin Banani, under the title 'The Epic of the Kings' London, 1967. For the Mongols, David Morgan, The Mongols, Oxford, 1986.

31. For the 'Intellect vs. the Heart' dichotomy, see W.C. Chittick, The Sufi Path of Love, pp. 220-26.

32. Jaidev's twelfth century work Gitagovinda is a classic in its genre, though a shade paler than the Brahma-Vaivarta Purana. There is besides the Sringar-ras poetry of Bihari in the 17th century, edited and translated into English by K.P. Bahadur as Bihari: The Satsai, New Delhi, 1990. A good number of the legendary Kangra paintings revelve around the Radha-Krishna romance and some of them leave nothing to imagination.

33. Zatalli's poems have been put together by Naim Ahmed and published from Aligarh in 1977.

34. Zia al-Din Barani, Fatawa-i Jahandari, English tr. by M. Habib and Afsar Khan under the title Political Theory of the Delhi Sultanate, Allahabad, n.d., p.44-47.

35. Zia al-Din Barani, Tarikh-i Firuz Shahi, ed. Sir Saiyid Ahmad Khan, Calcutta, 1862, p. 290. Whether or not the conversation between the Sultan and the Qazi did take place, the attitude attributed to the theologian echoes one that actually existed such as in Barani's mind, for it closely parallels his observations in the Fatawa.

36. Abdullah, Tarikh-i Daudi, ed. S. Abd al-Rashid, Aligarh, 1954, pp. 59-60.

37. Mulla Abd al-Qadir Badauni, Muntakhab al-Tawarikh, ed. Ahmad Ali and Lees, III, Calcutta, 1868, pp. 80-82.

38. Ralph Russell makes this valuable point in The Pursuit of Urdu Literature, p. 43.

39. Muhammad Sadiq is firm that Urdu ghazal owed nothing to anything Indian either in its motifs, or imagery or even the flora and fauna of the land; everything about it was of Persian origin. Hence, Sadiq finds the Urdu ghazal rather boring, a kind of 'museum piece', A History of Urdu Literature, pp. 14-16. In this he is merely reiterating Ram Babu Saksena's view, op. cit., p. 21. However, several

other critics and historians of the literature emphasise the Indian social and linguistic landscape which nurtured the Urdu ghazal. See, for such views, Syed Ehtesham Hussain, Urdu Adab ki Tanqidi Tarikh, New Delhi, 1983, pp. 31-32; Al-i Ahmad Suroor, 'Ghazal ka Fun' in Kamil Quraishi, ed., Urdu Ghazal, Delhi, 1987, pp. 27-28.

40. For a fascinating account of this transformation, see Frances W. Pritchett, 'Emperor of India: Landhaur bin Sa'dan in the Hamza cycle', in Christopher Shackle, ed., Urdu and Muslim South Asia, pp. 67-75.

41. M. Sadiq, Urdu Literature, p. 45.

42. Harbans Mukhia, 'Indian Folklore and Peasant Mentality', submitted to the Seminar on 'Peasant Culture and Consciousness', Bellagio, January 1990.

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